

November 2018

# VOICES



The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

[www.touchstones.org](http://www.touchstones.org)

**F**or more than 35 years, Touchstones staff has developed partnerships with teachers around the world. While we often hear from teachers and students how important Touchstones programs are to their development, we have less opportunity to hear parents' perspectives. This recent exchange between a teacher, a student (T), Howard Zeiderman, and a parent illustrates how Touchstones discussions empower and bring people together.

**The teacher wrote:**

Last year in my high school English classes I started converting from a grading system (which I've used throughout my career) to a "grade-less" system where students receive feedback on substantive work. Students reflect on their learning at least once/week and conduct a "grading" conference with me. Recently, I had a face-to-face conference with a student, T, who has a speech impediment (stuttering). He moved through his written document with minimal problem. When he came to his reflection on Touchstones, he felt he'd grown immensely. Let me preface what he shared with this:

T came to me at the beginning of the year because he was worried about Touchstones discussions and participation, given his

**Here's what T wrote:**

Of all the things we have done so far, I am most happy with the results of Touchstones. I expected to not participate much, if even at all. But I felt drawn to the discussions and thought it might be a good way to initiate some self-improvement. To my own surprise, I really enjoy the Touchstones system. I have been a talkative member of the group and my input has always been of meaning to the discussion. As well I help keep the discussion active and moving forward. I think I am at my best when participating in Touchstones Discussions.

**The teacher responded:**

From years of speech and debate coaching, I know that students with speech impediments are often some of the most determined when it comes to public speaking. However, I've never had a student like this student in my Touchstones classes. His reaction above is a testament to his own drive. Moreover, it is a testament to the "system," as he calls it and its ability to promote a space in which all members of all abilities are welcome, in which all ideas are considered, and in which all members can realize growth in ways the actual "system" of school generally ignores.

speech impediment. I explained I don't grade these discussions and look for growth over time at the personal and group level.



*Touchstones believes in a world where people of all backgrounds, beliefs, and ideologies engage in mindful and collaborative discussion to address complex local and global issues.*



***After reading this, Howard Zeiderman, Touchstones Co-founder and President thanked the teacher and asked him to share this with T:***

Dear T,

I am very grateful for your thoughts about Touchstones. At six, I developed a terrible stutter which continued until high school. Even as a grad student at Princeton I could still have great difficulty saying my name. That still persists.

My stutter made me aware how hard it is to speak in general, even without a stutter and how one crosses an abyss whenever one tries. I applaud your courage in trying and your trust in others to have made that very vulnerable attempt. You are a beacon for others in the world that is emerging, where each of us must insist on having a voice coupled with ears that strive to listen and make room for others.

I look forward to our paths intersecting,

Best,

Howard Zeiderman

***The teacher shared Howard's reply with T and T's mom, and here is what T's mom wrote back:***

Dear Teacher,

Thank you so very much for sharing this. T has talked with me recently about having this discussion with you, about the gradeless system, and about how proud he was of his work and progress.

That's some amazing feedback from the Touchstones founder and I'm so grateful you shared it with us. I'm very proud of T and the person he's growing up to be. He's insightful and had a great deal of both empathy and introspection. Here you've provided an example of how he's applied those things to himself and his own learning.

Thank you so much for creating a safe and positive learning environment for T. I believe that vulnerability is the key to a fulfilling and happy life and you've given him a chance to safely try and succeed.

With gratitude,

B

It indeed takes a village. Happy Thanksgiving to all and a special thank you for those who strive every day to ensure all people have a voice in and outside the circle.

—With deepest and sincerest appreciation from the Touchstones staff.

## **Tuesdays with Howard**

*By Tom Dabney*

**T**uesdays with Howard" best conveys the long arc of Touchstones Discussion Project in my efforts to become a better thinker, collaborator and contributing community member. It was a Tuesday when Howard Zeiderman conveyed the centrality of those objectives to Touchstones' mission to help people of all ages and situations live and thrive in community. You can imagine my first rewarding experience, as a volunteer discussion leader at my children's elementary school for two years, followed by two more as they home schooled with others.

## **EXPANDING THE CIRCLE**



Jonathan Adams (left) talks with Elliott Zuckerman (right) during the Campaign event on 10/27/2018.

Dear Friends,

We are nearing the end of the year, and our 3-year Touchstones Legacy Campaign is now underway. This campaign aims to ensure that Touchstones is sustainable going forward to reach ever more students, teachers, veterans, seniors and other members of our communities throughout the coming decades.

The Campaign kick-started with an extraordinarily generous gift from Elliott Zuckerman who has bequeathed all his paintings (and that would be MANY of them!) to Touchstones to be used as needed to finance our mission in the future. Would that we could all be so generous, though each one of us makes a difference.

Our time is now. With growing divisions across our communities, the need for a program like Touchstones is great. Touchstones has the unique ability to teach us how to better listen to and communicate with each other, how to collaborate, and how to be the engaged citizens and leaders our country cries for and deserves.

Please reach out to us for more information about how you can participate in the Campaign and bring others into the Touchstones circle. Thank you!

—Debra Valentine, Campaign Co-chair, with Co-chairs Kurt Redfield and Mikael Salovaara



Then, after witnessing Howard’s remarkable program for inmates at a federal penitentiary, I pitched our local sheriff on offering Touchstones at our city detention center, a rewarding year-plus effort.

For the last several years, once a month on Tuesday nights, Howard has led eight to ten of us, all active and retired Washington, DC executives, in discussion. We, like all students, try to bring our varied life experiences to bear on a text strange and startling and yet so familiar, reflecting on what it reveals about us, our changing society, and the possibilities we may bring to it.

Invariably, our exploration and collaboration renew us and fortify our resolve to practice these essential skills of community building, knowing that the well-being of all people is so naturally intertwined and depends on the exercise of these skills. We are each fortunate in the opportunities Touchstones provides as volunteer and donor to serve its audience of students, veterans, detainees, retirees, and others.

## Partners on the Road Back

By Sean Hutzell, Project Coordinator

On November 10<sup>th</sup> of Veterans Day weekend, Touchstones honored veterans by participating in a panel sponsored by the Veterans History Project (VHP) at the Library of Congress to discuss “writing and literature as a means of coping with service experience.” Touchstones Executive Director, Stefanie Takacs, joined Lovella Calica, Founder of Warrior Writers, and veteran Mohamed Sheriff, Division Coordinator of Literature and Arts Education at the National Endowment for the Arts, to explore how writing and literature support veterans in their return home.



Monica Mohindra leads a panel discussion at the Library of Congress during the Veterans Day weekend program, *The Road Back*.

Our relationship with the Library of Congress began last year with veterans participating in the National Endowment for the Humanities-funded Touchstones discussion program, *Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home*. Several program participants and Touchstones staff received a private tour of the Library of Congress from the VHP Director—herself a Navy veteran—Karen Lloyd, when they were there to submit personal narratives to the Library’s collection.

This spring, Touchstones invited Monica Mohindra, VHP’s Head of Program Coordination and Communication, to attend and share information with participants during the second run of *Completing the Odyssey*. Monica expressed afterward how impressed she was with the work she saw underway. That led to her recent invitation for us to participate in the panel discussion this past weekend.

During the panel discussion, moderated by Monica, Stefanie discussed programming already completed with veterans from the Baltimore-Washington-Annapolis area. While initial support came from the NEH for those endeavors, volunteerism from veterans has continued to bring the program to new participants. Touchstones plans for continued programming in 2019.

The panelists also discussed the nuances and successes in using literature and writing as tools for veterans exploring experiences in service and the transition to civilian life. While the panelist’s backgrounds and program methods were quite different, many of their goals are the same.

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*He hopes people will recognize that veterans’ lives are not defined by their time in service.*

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At the close of the discussion, Mohamed, Mo for short, offered some advice for all to consider. He hopes people will recognize that veterans’ lives are not defined by their time in service. Service certainly helped shape them, but there was a time before they became service members and there was a time after, when they earned the title ‘veteran.’

When veterans write and explore their experience through creative processes, they are “stretched”, he said. Their existence isn’t tied expressly to their experiences in service but expands to encompass the unique individual who served and has now rejoined society as a person.



## Why I Participate

By Charles Green

Having graduated from the St. John's College Graduate Institute program, a Touchstones discussion feels extremely familiar to me, with participants sitting around a table and talking about selections from a book. In the Annapolis Touchstones group, we help each other to understand the texts with our questions and comments, so the process becomes truly a collaborative effort. Listening to others' thoughts on the text, as they approach it from their different backgrounds, gets me thinking

*I always leave looking at a book from a different point of view.*

about it in ways I had never thought of before, and I always leave looking at a book from a different point of view. As we discuss what we have read, I am comfortable working out my thoughts as I talk, responding to what has been said earlier, and hopefully building on it or refining it. I appreciate how Howard, our moderator, encourages the group to participate with thought-provoking questions, and prods us back on track if our discussion ranges too far afield, without dominating the conversation. I am also thankful that while our discussions may sometimes get heated, they always stay civil, even if we might disagree about important issues, which is rare in this age when it seems arguments quickly devolve into personal attacks.

Even if I might not always come away understanding the work better, I always feel like I have come to know my fellow participants better, appreciating where they have come from. In today's contentious world, that seems like an extremely important byproduct of time well-spent with others.

## Touchstones is Going Places

By Lynn Cloutier,  
Business & Operations Manager

We are very excited that Touchstones added seven new schools and organizations to our list of those already implementing our materials.

### United States

- Parkway Middle School, Lauderhill, FL
- Minneola Charter School, Minneola, FL
- Mount Washington School, Baltimore, MD
- Williamsburg Montessori, Brooklyn, NY

### Canada

- Eaton Arrowsmith School, Vancouver BC
- Sunrise School Division, Beausejour, MB
- YMCA of Greater St. John, NB

Additional Touchstones materials to complement existing programs were sold to:

- D.C. Public Schools
- Anne Arundel County Public Schools, Annapolis, MD
- Haddon Township High School, NJ

This fall, Touchstones was invited to attend two conferences in Florida. The Florida Association for Gifted (FLAG) Conference, where Executive Director Stefanie Takacs was a featured presenter, and the Southern Florida Gifted and Talented Symposium in Broward County. She was invited to Broward's symposium by county educators who participated in a mini-Touchstones workshop during the FLAG conference. Educators at both conferences were excited to learn about Touchstones programs with gifted students around the country, and many are eager to



High School students in the jazz band – part of the gifted programming in Broward County performing during the GT Symposium

introduce our work to their students and schools.

In addition, both Howard Zeiderman and Stefanie Takacs have continued supporting new and expanded implementations in Baltimore City College High School and Mount Washington School (also in Baltimore) with in-service teacher training and coaching. Touchstones has also continued its *pro bono* work in Kodiak, Alaska, through the many talents of Sharon Thomas. Sharon taught using Touchstones for a number of years in her tenure as a public high school English teacher in Cecil County, Maryland. On the calendar for the new year we look forward to returning to Trinity College School in Ontario, Canada to run teacher professional development, including training and coaching.

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